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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 000455

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ES](#) [ELECTIONS](#)

SUBJECT: SALVADORAN PRESIDENT SACA DEEPLY CONCERNED ABOUT  
POLL NUMBERS

Classified By: CDA Michael Butler. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

1. (C) During a lengthy February 23 evening meeting with Polcouns, one Saca cabinet member and two key presidential advisers recounted how stressed Saca is over the March 12 national elections and over recent polls showing Saca and his ARENA party are not faring as well as they expected. Asked why Saca's private pollster (a key Polcouns contact) was no longer returning phone calls, one adviser confided that the pollster is in hot water with Saca because the pollster was apparently padding poll numbers to paint a rosier picture for Saca. When Saca started seeing poll numbers by other polling firms which showed Saca's mayoral candidate for San Salvador, as well as several other ARENA candidates, behind the FMLN candidates, he reportedly confronted his pollster and rebuked him in the strongest terms. Since then Saca and his operatives are looking much more carefully at other polls. As a matter of fact, in the course of the conversation, one of the presidential advisers, who is a pollster himself, received a call from Saca campaign manager Julio Rank. Rank had heard that the adviser had just completed a private poll for San Salvador news daily "El Mundo," and was fishing for poll results.

2. (C) The adviser/pollster then proceeded to run down his own poll numbers in general terms, predicting that, if the elections were held today, San Salvador would likely go to the FMLN, though by a narrow margin. Asked to predict the number of diputado seats ARENA and the FMLN would win if the election were held today, the adviser/pollster said that ARENA could win between 33 and 35 seats, and that the FMLN could win 27, but has a real chance to win as many as 28. He added that the PCN (National Conciliation Party) is likely to win around 12 Assembly seats, the PDC (Christian Democratic Party) three or four, and the left-of center CD (Democratic Change Party) would win two. Based on these numbers, he concluded that there is a real possibility that ARENA will be worse off after the elections than they are now, in terms of their ability to form a voting block in the National Assembly. His reason for this is that a best case scenario, meaning ARENA with 35 diputados, PCN with 12, and PDC with 4, would add up to a total anti-FMLN vote of 51, or six votes short of the necessary 57 votes to pass constitutional reforms or increase the national debt. Asked whether the CD could be part of an anti-FMLN Assembly coalition, the adviser/pollster said that the two CD candidates who will be elected (Hector Dada and Ruben Zamora) are "hard-liners" and will not deal with ARENA.

3. (C) All three interlocutors agreed that Saca is counting heavily on his Washington trip and potential "prizes" he can extract from Washington to give him the boost he feels he desperately needs. All three also agreed that a successful trip and the publicity Saca derives from it, may not be enough to change voters minds. They predicted that ARENA will gain Assembly seats and mayoralties, but will ultimately lose the biggest prize, the ability to create a coalition in the Assembly to move Saca's constitutional reforms forward.

4. (C) Comment: All three interlocutors have been highly reliable Embassy contacts. The cabinet member is one of the "stars" of Saca's team and considered highly ethical. The adviser/pollster is considered one of the best and most serious pollsters here, with a long track record. All three consider themselves very good friends of Saca and loyal to him, but are resentful of Saca's innermost circle, composed of Secretary to the Presidency Elmer Charlaix and Minister of Governance Rene Figueroa, who, in their view, manipulate the president and isolate him from his friends.  
Butler